

The Good Fight (July 2006)

George Walker's *Love and Anger* celebrates the virtues of a good fight, of a good war, and the rewards it offers its participants. Though wars are a kind of an embrace, they cannot be engaged in by lovers—they require good guys and bad guys, who hate one another. Walker implicitly understands how the *desire* for war *mostly* moves *all* wars, and communicates it primarily by cuing us to appreciate that all the good characters involved in the play's battle between good and evil have similar-seeming evil counterparts. That is, he guides us to see everyone involved in the fray as potentially interchangeable, as *truly* of the same kind. So if war is being praised, is there anything or anyone in the play subjected to unmitigated critique? Yes, someone is. Though it well might be missed, *Eleanor* is set up for brutal criticism, for she is an agent of the cruel suppression *peacemaking* affords, and the play is strongly aligned against goodly-doers of this absolutely worst sort.

I understand that many will read or see the play and judge it a satiric attack on power, lust, and greed—the usual triumvirate of the awful—embodied in its characters Sean Harris and John Connor. Yet much would have to be ignored in order to interpret the play this way. One would have to ignore much of how the play begins, for instance, for it begins with the ostensible foremost good and enlightened character, Peter Maxwell, indulging in just these same vices. Though he was once as vice-prone as any other, though he agrees with Harris when he argues that “for twenty years [he was] [. . .] one of the greediest and one of the biggest” “greedy prick[s]” (70), Maxwell believes himself now reborn, newly pure. Ostensible evidence of his goodly transformation comes from the fact that he gave up a lucrative position as head of a prominent Toronto law firm to deal with society's downtown' downtrodden. It also comes from his giving-away of all his possessions. Connor is willing to believe Sarah when she suggests, as part of an effort to manipulate him, that Maxwell might be “env[ious]” (50) of him; but though vice-prone, he has no real cause to be envious, for the play begins by showing just how much he actually acquired through descent.

He gets, for instance, new *dientele*—of in truth an especially appealing kind. Though Maxwell wants us to imagine them as consisting not just of the disadvantaged but of the “quasi-exotic,” the “pathetic,” the “dregs” (30-31), and though Harris deems Maxwell's new *dientele* more reason to pity him, to not draw the law down upon him, the only *dient* of his we actually encounter provides him

something he likely did not possess with any surety with his previous clientele—namely, dear evidence of his power *over* them. That is, though Maxwell says that with his previous clientele he used to “piss on their ingrained intelligence” (19), simply in order to afford his services his previous clientele would have had to have counted amongst the very rich and entitled—they would have been the sort to know that Maxwell was *their* lawyer, ultimately their *servant*, that *they* were the ones paying him. And though they would have respected Maxwell’s reputation and genius, this would have made him—but appropriate, to properly attend to their business. Indeed, though the play concerns Maxwell’s life after having left his old law firm, it still reminds us of what previous clientele contact could have been like by showing us how Harris’s new client, Connor, reacts when he believes he’s being poorly served. When confused and confounded by Sarah’s behavior towards him, Connor turns to Harris and exclaims: “Look, you’re my lawyer and I want some answers from you right now!” (51). With Gail, Maxwell’s new client, however, though she shows some dismay with her lawyer—i.e., Maxwell—too, she is readily made quiescent, for she is vastly more dependent on hers than Connor is on his own. Connor, being rich, can always hire a different lawyer, an option not available to her. Nor is there any chance that even if she could find other help, s/he’d count amongst the country’s best lawyerly minds, something we are told Maxwell once was, and may still be. Her dependency upon Maxwell, we note, is made dear both to her and to us at the beginning of the first scene. Maxwell seems to have taken advantage of the fact that he knows Gail really has no one else to turn to by speaking to her in ways he wouldn’t dare with a less dependent client—with someone who really could afford to turn down his services. Maxwell has talked to her—or, more accurately, *at* her—for a half an hour, concerning things which dearly interest him but are of little interest to her. When Gail complains about his apparent lack of interest in her own concerns, Maxwell responds by first reminding her that she is marginal (Maxwell tells her, “You’re marginal. Your cause is marginal. Outside the corridor, so to speak” [13]), then of how lucky she is to have found him (Maxwell tells her, “I believe you when obviously no one else does” [14]), and moves her to appreciate that “a shiny new future” (15) depends entirely on her “letting” him behave just as he wishes (Maxwell tells her, “you’ll have to allow me to proceed in my own way” [14]). That is, in response to her agitation and assertiveness, Maxwell manages her into—*for him*—comfortable pliancy.

Gail will not be paying Maxwell in cash—there is something else he desires from

her. This something isn't sex, but the play guides us to appreciate that—if he had been a slightly different man... For with Gail, the play presents us with a childish—with her ball cap and jeans—young woman whose readiness to be servile is suggested in her being in his office in response to Maxwell's beckoning (i.e., his "call" [14]). She has a husband—but his return to her rests entirely with her getting this middle-aged man to agree to take on her cause. This he agrees to, but only if she agrees to "trust" (15) him, to accept his unusual behavior and submit to his odd requests. He hints that the thing she most has to offer is love, a willingness and an ability to service the needs of all those in "need [of] love" (15). She shows this, but also fear: she fears he might be "crooked." In sum, though I think—especially with his easing her fears, his effort to get her to trust him, and his assurance that if she does so her reward will be a shiny new future—there is something in their relationship that smacks of the pedophilic "relationship" between the candy-laden pedophile and the guileless child, we more strongly sense the middle-aged man seeking not quite so puerile revitalization through associations with the young. Someone, that is, who is undergoing your typical midlife crisis.

It should be difficult to understand Maxwell any different. He is in his early fifties and has been further reminded of his mortality by just having suffered a stroke. His mind is dearly on death: when he surveys his life, he imagines it one where "Death was surrounding [him] [. . .] like a demon inevitability" (17). He suddenly understands his life as unfulfilling—the *definitive* midlife crisis complaint. Harris, we note, makes the same complaint. And when Harris visits them we are made to appreciate how these ostensibly now completely different men still share the exact same life goals.

With Harris and Maxwell, we have two men of about the same age (specifically, Maxwell is "50," Harris, in his "early 50s" [12]), who pursued the same career path—law—and seek rejuvenation: Maxwell seeks "rebirth" (31), Harris, "new challenges" (27). Maxwell believes himself on a very different track than the one Harris still resides on, and there is cause to mistake them as vastly dissimilar from one another. Maxwell has stripped himself of his earthly goods; Harris' new pursuit is built on all he had accumulated: he will use the friends and reputation he has acquired from being an established lawyer to launch a career as a politician. Maxwell locates himself in the "gutters" and associates with the destitute; Harris seeks "new mountain"-tops and takes on increasingly affluent and powerful clients (i.e., Connor). But the differences, though they appear significant, remain superficial: both paths attend to the very same

needs, to assuaging the exact same fear. The (stereo)typical midlife fear is of death, and both paths tend to this fear. Maxwell believes that with his new life he has regained his childhood. He prefers to be called “Petie” because it better suits who he has become— “[y]ounger,” “more unfinished” (30). He believes he has become the person he once was before law school corrupted him, the young Maxwell who once had principles, who followed his parents’ code of honor. Rather than someone who will soon face death, he believes his miraculous re-invention of himself amounts to a re-birth. He will help create a “new era”: phase two is “[t]he amazing rebirth of Petie Maxwell and the new era to which he is dedicated” (31). But though Maxwell will be reborn, Harris’s new path means his maybe never perishing: for no matter how successful a lawyer becomes, it is only the lawyer who moves on to become a politician that has any chance of being immortalized.

In short, the play provides very good reason for understanding these two men as not so different from one another as they prefer to believe is the case. Maxwell believes Harris used him. He wants Harris to believe his theft of his wife and kids made him feel like one of “God’s lowest creatures” (32). But we should not believe him in this, for Harris’ theft is actually advantageous for Maxwell. In pursuit of a new life path, Maxwell seeks to shorn himself of all that ties him to a previous one he associates with death. He gleefully gives away all he had acquired during his twenty years as a lawyer, but had he also had to distance himself from his wife and kids, he would not have been able to do so so readily. Middle-aged men who in their mid-life crisis act childish and hang out with young women, often experience a crippling hangover: they must deal with the anger and disappointment they receive from wives and children they’ve neglected and humiliated. Thanks to Harris’ “theft” (for though Maxwell chides Harris for thinking of his wife as a possession, it seems clear that Maxwell thinks of her as much the same: he exclaims, “You’d been screwing *my* wife” [32; emphasis added]), Maxwell can more readily understand his rebirth as something earned.

If Harris’ own path wasn’t predicated on accumulation, Maxwell might actually owe him one for taking his wife (a wife, we note, he thought a “jerk” [31]) and kids off his hands. By having Maxwell argue that his humiliation could be completed *either* by his bending down and kissing Harris’ ass *or* by Harris bending down and kissing Maxwell’s, the play suggests that who exactly is using whom here may not be so clear. More than this, with the humiliation accomplishable regardless of who does the bending down and who the remaining upright, the play encourages us to assess

Maxwell's descent and Harris' ascent as interchangeable; as means to the very same end.

Since Harris is Maxwell's old partner, and since Connor is made to seem as much Harris' new partner as he is his new client (they are likened to a team throughout), we are guided to compare Maxwell and Connor as if they were former and current partners of Harris.' And, indeed, in how they both differ from Harris—and despite Maxwell's attempt to establish Connor as nothing more than a Nazi—they *can* seem similar. Maxwell acknowledges that Harris is charming. His charm and ease are the products of his privileged family background. He is polished, good-looking, superior—the sort of person people can feel almost obligated to promote to societies' highest positions. Both Maxwell and Connor have made good but despite the odds, through their ingenuity and boldness. Connor makes clear that he more or less emerged from nothing, that he came from a working-class background. The same seems true of Maxwell as well, for he characterizes his background as one where humility and honor were the highest virtues—virtues, that is, held in highest-esteem typically by the conservative working class. Both, too, are hotheads. Connor is explosive and quick to anger; and even though Maxwell can be tender, he certainly rages as well. (Harris accuses him of having spread “outrageous, bullheaded, unsupportable, inflaming crap” about Connor, and given what we see of Maxwell, we do not doubt the accuracy of these characterizations.)

Both claim the same turf: they're ostensibly all about serving the needs of the lower classes. Maxwell would be their legal and moral crusader, Connor their guide to all they need know of the world. In fact, given all we had by then heard of Connor and Maxwell, at the beginning of scene three, when Sarah is telling Eleanor and Gail her story of an invasion, as we hear her story and think of its protagonists we might be thinking as much of Maxwell as we are of Connor. Her story is about invasive men “looking for a place to take over,” that are “[l]ooking for adventure” (33). These men have “sold” (33) all their goods, have “prostitute[d]” “their wives,” and set up a “headquarters” in this alien territory (33-4). They believe themselves “indestructible,” are intent on being “free to be themselves,” have voices inside them “talking to them,” and have a proprietary, expansive desire to get their “word [. . .] out” (34). Maxwell is looking for adventure (he will identify his activities as an “adventure” [42]), he has given away all his goods, he has a wife now sleeping with another man, he believes he is “immune” (32) to persecution, he has entered an unfamiliar part of town and set up headquarters there, he has argued that his turn to the “dark side” in

law school resulted from a force having taken him over, he believes himself finally “back” (26) to being the man he once was, he has made the whole city aware of his opinion of Connor, and he has his mind on the “reorganization of an entire culture” (29). So even though Sarah’s story is about crusaders who hate those not-white-in-color, and even though Maxwell and others repeatedly call Connor a Nazi, it is a story that actually lends to understanding its main protagonists as being more similar to *Maxwell* than to Connor.

So given that the play encourages us to consider just how different villains really are from heroes, the play could be assessed as a satire on the efforts of societal do-gooders, with all their ostensibly selfless, noble intentions. Though I have focused on the play’s first act, its ending even better supports this thesis. The trial evidences an outrageously greedy and unfair Maxwell. Though he acknowledges that you can repent just by “say[ing] to yourself, ‘I repent’” (70), Maxwell won’t allow that Harris might do the same to exonerate himself. That is, “The demigod [,] [. . .] [t]he former greedy prick[,] [. . .] [t]he man with a hole in his brain[,] [. . .] [t]he angry man[,] [. . .] [t]he reborn man[,] [. . .] [t]he avenger!” (71)—*Maxwell*—is the only one who gets to repent. One cannot but sense here that to Maxwell, Harris is simply means to satisfy his own need to feel grandiose. The trial also evidences a greedy and unfair Sarah as the presiding judge. Sarah believes she is fair, not prejudicial (79), but she too is shown using the trial to humiliate Connor and Harris—the same need she attended to earlier by fooling them into thinking she was a lawyer (“Well that just shows how stupid you are. I’m a mental patient. You’ve been tricked by a person with a shattered mind” [51]). Her verdict of brutal humiliation and execution (they are to be drowned in toilets) for the guilty, is moved by whim, not evidence. And since this verdict follows a long series of humiliations (which include brutal physical assault, and exhaustive name-calling) inflicted upon the two (on Connor, especially), it is no surprise that a number of critics find the court scene indulgent and counter-productive.

Mel Gussow, for one, in a review for the *New York Times*, argues that the play is “self-defeating[.]” for “[a]s the lawyer [Maxwell] [. . .] sinks deeper into misanthropy and into sermonizing, he becomes increasingly tiresome” (*New York Times*, 9 December 1990). Of course, if the play is judged a satiric attack on progressive reformers rather than on the rich and powerful, Gussow’s reaction would argue for its effectiveness, not its failure. Indeed, those who react to the play as Gussow does and are familiar with the history of satire, could see the play as akin to Apuleius’

Metamorphoses, for, just as *Love and Anger* makes the rich and poor seem similar to one another, just as it repeatedly emphasizes their intrinsic similarity and mutual culpability by having them frequently fuse into “a mass of punching, kicking, groaning bodies” (52),

[t]he *Metamorphoses* shows that in a narrative satire fictions operate through the interrelatedness of characters: not only the relationship between two people, a fool and a knave, but between rich and poor fools, [. . .] and so on. They are held close to a theme or a vice, but they also project a visualizable world of total interrelatedness, like a cheese completely infiltrated by maggots [. . .] [.] As it is unrolled, this world is monotonously similar in all its details, and finally static; but a world nevertheless in which Lucius [principle character of the *Metamorphoses*] is himself deeply implicated. (Ronald Paulson 57)

Or perhaps they would find the play akin to picaresque satires, to those satires that feature Quixote (heroic)-figures who aim to be honorable but “easily become [. . .] selfish egoist[s] who tr[y] to make over the world in [their] [. . .] own image” (Paulson 101). But though in so many ways *Love and Anger* seems intent on critiquing would-be heroes and leaving it at that, its over-all intention is *not* really to show them up. Instead, the play argues for the real wisdom, rather than the folly, to be found—by one and all—through war.

The play makes this argument primarily through what it shows happening to Sarah when she engages with those she believes evil and beyond redemption. Just as it worked to make Maxwell comparable to those he feuds with, the play encourages us to understand Sarah as much the same as all the others constituting the massings that develop out of each of the melees. She believes Connor to be similarly possessed by mean-spirited voices, which talk to and control them. She serves as Maxwell’s new partner, and thereby is primed for ready comparison with his previous one—Harris. She too is in search of revitalization and freedom. And though while pretending to be his new law partner, she is the one who voices a loud critique of simplistic, brutal solutions (i.e., she gets Connor to admit the absurdity of killing the poor as a solution to downtown problems), she actually demonstrates why brutality can be an effective means towards solving longstanding concerns. After Sarah does the amazing in persuading a veteran lawyer and a canny businessman she is a competent lawyer who can handle and manipulate Maxwell, she, Gail, Harris, and Connor participate in a wild melee. The fight is followed by a blackout and an intermission: the audience is

made to wonder just what might have happened?, to speculate as to what good could possibly have followed from two women taking on at least one highly enraged male opponent who “wanted to kill” (53) them. When the play resumes, the audience is provided good reason to decide things turned out badly, for “[t]he office is a mess,” “Gail is sitting on the floor against the desk [,] [. . .] and Sarah is lying face down near the door” (53). But though Sarah says she likely has a broken bone, both she and Gail are in fact actually doing very well. Sarah found delivering blows very “satisfying”; she thoroughly enjoyed getting “in a few really good whacks” (53). She in fact guesses that she’d have been better off if she’d “started hitting earlier in [. . .] life” (53), and seems right in this, for fighting lead not just to a high but to be able “to make sense” (54), to sanity, to a willingness to admit she does not in fact believe herself black: a substantial step toward using something superior to avoidance to deal with her troubles.

The battle proved therapeutic, and in the loving and supportive sisterhood it helped beget between Gail and Sarah, it looks to have engendered even more. And we note that after the fight, neither of them hate their opponents. Instead, Gail reflects on how her preferred way of seeing the rich doaked her from being aware of her own *need* to hate them, and admits that the rich might not even actually be the villains she had admittedly willfully taken them for. Sarah admits she imagines herself black because it helps her “feel brave” (54), and she’s surely onto something here: for previously she admitted that though she “doesn’t take messages” from ordinary people, she would rise to action if such calls came from “[p]eople threatening Petie” (35).

Though they seem to do little more than drug her up, her doctors might still appreciate that what Sarah really needed was to be around those who could draw her out. For we are told they believe Sarah “has to have a way, even in her state, to manifest her courage [. . .] [—] [t]hat her courage is still the most important thing to her” (35). It is Eleanor who relates this information, and it is Eleanor who dearly does not believe it—for she responds to Sarah’s participation in the fray simply by berating her for it. She sees the results of the melee and judges it foul—and *as* surely resulting from Sarah’s impulsive decision to attack Gail. She is irate, and tells her sister to stop “scaring [her] [. . .] to death” (56). Eleanor would have Sarah remain pacified, sedated through drugs, because an active and alert Sarah is a source of considerable distress for her. We note that Eleanor wishes Maxwell had failed in his efforts to shift his work to the slums for the same selfish reason. For even while he’s suffering from

another stroke, she can't help but berate him for making a move that has her feeling "very uneasy" and unable to "function" (56). Maxwell, however, wants Eleanor to join in with his group, to join in with his movement. It is a request he makes several times, and we note her typical response: "Don't involve me in whatever it is you're up to these days. I have problems of my own" (16). Near the play's close, however, she says she would be "grateful" (61) to be included—but in truth this would be cause not for celebration but for regret, for nowhere in the text is there a hint that she would prove anything but a very sour addition to Maxwell's gang.

Eleanor is a bummer, a spoiler of everyone else's fun. Even after she says she would "honestly" be very grateful to be included in Maxwell's plans, just her presence causes Sarah to lose confidence in her performance as the trial's judge (we noticed her ascent from patient to lawyer to judge) and begin to cry. She is most active in the trial when she slaps Connor on the face for his blasphemous prayer, an act consistent with her response to Maxwell's lambasting of religion at the beginning of the play. (A battle follows her slapping of Connor, but we note that since somehow everyone *but* Eleanor ends up "form[ing] [the] [. . .] mass of [tangled] bodies" that end up on the couch, her being excluded is made to seem as if it is one of the points behind the melee.) She is the one who would call the police or the hospital in response to any dangerous development—and we note that if she had called an ambulance after Maxwell suffered his stroke, he would have been denied the opportunity to die honorably, redemptively, in battle. (Harris and other characters also at times threaten to call the police, but they always pull back from doing so; indeed, their threats to call the police make them seem akin to kids who threaten the same but are actually determined not to let things move into adult control.)

We also note that in scene one Maxwell's sudden need to berate people on the street, to insist that they "[h]ave a little self-respect" (19), follows his being schooled by Eleanor on the proper way to treat people. That is, Eleanor, who was introduced as "[c]arrying a bag of cleaning supplies" (16), who is identified by her sister as being "brilliant" at "tidy[ing] up" (61), makes Maxwell, the would-be crusader of the downtrodden, sound, in his demand that the street people "[g]et out of the garbage" (19), just like she does. The real threat to Maxwell and Sarah's rejuvenation clearly is not Harris and Connor, who, though they begin by mocking the trial, not only actively participate in it but end up crediting its legitimacy—they dance and cheer when they believe the apparently-not-so-show trial has established their innocence and clarified their virtue—but rather, Eleanor. And after she unsettles Maxwell and Sarah,

she herself gets violated.

Connor greatly unsettles Eleanor when he handles her and moves her out of his way (20), and in this particular instance, violence is set up as praiseworthy, not because it can make people feel good but because it can of course also make them feel really, really lousy. Maxwell judges Connor's behavior to be truly odious. He calls Connor a "bully" (20), and suggests his behavior toward Eleanor proves he must have beaten his secretary so badly she required hospitalization (21). But the play guides us to question just how offended Maxwell really is by Connor's violence towards her, to wonder if at some level if Connor, in attacking her, is serving as Maxwell's agent. Connor's assault on Eleanor follows a contest between Maxwell and her that seems as if between mother and child. While interacting with Gail, he takes out and plays with a string of colored paper dips. Eleanor, wishing him to behave less childishly, takes them from him, an act he follows rebelliously by taking another dip from out of his pocket. But since this contest ends with her successfully chiding Maxwell away from childish behavior toward an advocacy of orthodox adult virtues (i.e., cleanliness, self-respect), it is one she wins decisively. And then, we note, Connor bullies her. Maxwell actually construes the attack as a child's upon his mother. He asks Connor, "What's wrong. Some trouble with mummy?" (20). But the play makes clear that it is Maxwell, not Connor, who is prone to think of Eleanor as his mother, for his near last words are, "Eleanor, you look like my mother" (83).

Eleanor is not gravely hurt by play's end, and if we assess the play as holding the same conception of mothers many of those living in the twentieth-century's other extended period of Darwinian capitalism—the 1920s—did, this would have been too much to ask. At one point in the play Maxwell calls God a "she" (42), suggesting that rather than a man and a father the almighty is instead a woman and a mother. Ann Douglas writes that '20's New Yorkers believed the same thing, that is, that the greatest obstacle to growth was a (historical) woman (in their case, their predecessor, the Victorian Titaness)—and held destroying her the first of priorities. Specifically, she argues in *Terrible Honesty* that for its cultural emergence modern New York depended upon a collective, ruthless effort to distinguish itself from a Victorian, matriarchal past. New Yorkers, she argues, believed their predecessors to be puppets of dan matriarchs, and in order to avoid their fate, made their city fully offensive to matriarchal control.

Douglas spends a great deal of her book delineating how writers especially played a big part in helping New Yorkers understand their city as matricidal, in showing how

they not only helped create but helped keep going the manic but highly creative '20s energy. And it may be that works such as *Love and Anger* played a part in helping sustain the manic period of indulgent capitalism Torontonians experienced at the end of the twentieth-century. For just like how writers in the '20s helped entrench the presence of the brutal, empowered father-figure, *Love and Anger* leaves us with the sense that the text's featured bully(er) of mothers—Connor—will continue to rule in Toronto. It ends with *him* feeling rejuvenated, dead set on “keep[ing] the momentum going” (81). And though it is easy to imagine playgoers being disappointed in this, it is just as easy to imagine the affluent amongst them, those enjoying all the spoils capitalism afforded them, feeling reassured that this satire was not one which foretold the end to bad-boy economics. Since satires are normally understood not just as critiques but as agents of reform, the Toronto-advantaged were likely well allayed in it actually playing out as something of an anti-satire.

Works Cited

- Douglas, Ann. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. Print.
- Gussow, Mel. “Behind the Scenes Villainy at Court.” *The New York Times*. 9 December 1990. Web.
- Paulson, Ronald. *The Fictions of Satire*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967. Print.
- Walker, George. *Love and Anger*. Toronto: Coach House, 1990. Print.